

NEWS *from the National Wildlife Refuge System*

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NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES: A BIRDWATCHER'S PARADISE

Birdwatching is fast becoming one of today's most popular outdoor hobbies. Yet only 100 years ago, many birds were valued only for their feathers, which were used to adorn hats and other fashions of the time. Tens of thousands of wading birds such as egrets, herons, ibises, and spoonbills were being slaughtered for their feathers and habitat for migratory birds was fast disappearing. Responding to growing public concern about wildlife, President Theodore Roosevelt created **Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge** in 1903, the first in what has become a 92-million-acre system of more than 500 national wildlife refuges.

National wildlife refuges protect important habitat along migratory bird flyways, as well as breeding and wintering grounds for waterfowl and other wildlife. Millions of North American birds that winter in Central or South America such as warblers, vireos, flycatchers, tanagers, and orioles migrate annually along with shorebirds and raptors through our national wildlife refuge system. Most of these refuges are open to the public and contain some of the finest birdwatching opportunities in the country. Here are a few hot spots for the birds:

For birders in Florida, **J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge** on Sanibel Island is a showcase. Visitors to "Ding" Darling can see all of Florida's large waders including roseate spoonbills, wood storks, ibises, and a dozen species of herons and egrets, as well as shorebirds, cormorants, gulls, and terns. This sub-tropical coastal mangrove habitat is easily accessible along a wildlife auto tour drive.

Across the state in Boynton Beach, **Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge** is the last natural remnant of the Northern Everglades and home to lots of Florida specialties including snail kites, limpkins, and purple gallinules. A boardwalk and marsh trail let visitors enjoy an inside peek at a cypress swamp. For the more adventuresome, a canoe trail leads to the more remote areas of the refuge.

Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge located near Titusville, Florida, offers excellent viewing along an auto tour loop, where visitors can enjoy large numbers of wading birds, shorebirds, terns, grebes, rails and wintering waterfowl, while ospreys and kingfishers hover over the waters in search of a meal.



AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...
where wildlife comes naturally!

On the West Coast, **San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge** offers visitors opportunity to see up to one million shorebirds, waterfowl, and wading birds resting here during migration. Some of the more colorful species such as American avocets and black-necked stilts can be seen in summer as well.

Just to the north, the **Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge Complex** (a group of six refuges near Tulelake) plays host to incredible numbers of migratory waterfowl, as well as 500 to 1,000 bald eagles that winter here--the largest concentration in the lower 48 states. With beautiful snow-capped Mount Shasta in the background, the Klamath refuge complex is well worth a visit.

For snow and Ross' geese contrasted against the desert skyline, try New Mexico's **Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge**, just 90 miles south of Albuquerque. A 15-mile tour loop, along with hiking trails, allows visitors the chance to watch some 60,000 of these "white geese," 20,000 sandhill cranes, and more than 60,000 ducks in the spectacular land of enchantment.

For a taste of more tropical birds, head farther down the river to southern Texas, to **Santa Ana and Lower Rio Grande Valley** national wildlife refuges near McAllen, where many Mexican species such as green jays, ringed and green kingfishers, and chachalacas make it just across the border to the northern extreme of their ranges.

Just an hour east of Santa Ana, **Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge** in Rio Hondo is home to northern aplomado falcons, black-bellied whistling ducks, and roadrunners as well as more than a million shorebirds and waterfowl. Eighty percent of all North America's redhead ducks winter here.

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Austwell, just up the coast to the north, is the wintering home for the world's last wild population of whooping cranes. They can be seen from observation towers or boat tours, along with sandhill cranes, pelicans, herons, egrets, and birds of prey.

In the Northeast, try visiting **Parker River National Wildlife Refuge** in Newburyport, Massachusetts, where the bird list tops more than 300 species. This Atlantic Ocean barrier island refuge is especially noted for its many winter visitors including snowy owls, northern rough-legged hawks, and snow buntings. Parker River has even been known to attract such noted rarities as Ross' gull (a pink-bellied Siberian species) and ivory gull (a pure white gull with black legs). A number of European species such as spotted redshank (a sandpiper) and garganey (a duck) have shown up here.

Farther south along the coast, visitors to Delaware's **Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge** can witness the spectacle of more than a million red knots, a small colorful sandpiper. Huge flocks stop during spring migration to feed on horseshoe crab eggs. In addition to shorebirds, **Bombay Hook** and **Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge** in nearby New Jersey are also wonderful places to observe waterfowl, raptors, and songbirds.

Midwestern birdwatchers may enjoy visiting **Horicon National Wildlife Refuge** near Mayville, Wisconsin, where up to 200,000 Canada geese gather each fall. Carved by glaciers in the last Ice Age, this 31,000-acre freshwater marsh is also one of the largest heron rookeries in the country, with more than 6,000 wading birds nesting here.

In western Tennessee and Kentucky, **Reelfoot National Wildlife Refuge** was formed when powerful earthquakes in the early 1800s caused this section of the Mississippi River floodplain to drop more than 35 feet. Now adorned with cypress trees, this beautiful 10,428-acre refuge provides habitat for 100,000 Canada geese, a quarter million ducks (including 20,000 colorful wood ducks), up to 200 bald eagles, 2 dozen types of warblers, and many other songbirds.

A bit more distant but well worth the trip is **Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge**, a remote 4.5-million-acre complex of rugged rocky islands and pounding surf teeming with wildlife. First set aside to protect sea otters, the refuge is home to more than 40 million nesting seabirds, including puffins, auklets, and eiders. Many Asian birds rarely seen in North America, including Steller's sea eagles, Siberian rubythroats, and Mongolian plovers, have been found on this refuge, which also hosts most of the world's wintering emperor goose population.

Want to know more about your National Wildlife Refuges or get involved? Call 1-800-344-WILD; visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service home page at <http://www.fws.gov> and click on National Wildlife Refuge System; or better yet, visit some of your 500-plus national wildlife refuges across the country!